

Espionage Attempts in the '50s Recalled

U.S. Image in Southeast Asia Suffers From Clumsy Intrigues of Agents

By Stanley Karnow

Washington Post Staff Writer

In a petulant mood one day last week, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gave an intriguing glimpse into history. Late in 1960, he disclosed, a Central Intelligence Agency operative had offered him a \$3-million bribe to conceal a bungled American espionage attempt. The shadowy affair allegedly involved girls, too — or as Lee put it, "like James Bond, only not so good."

On Wednesday, Wisconsin Democrat Clement Zablocki's House subcommittee on foreign affairs is scheduled to begin a closed inquiry into "what happened in Singapore."

But what happened in Singapore, though rather embarrassing, was relatively innocuous compared to an assortment of even clumsier covert efforts of Americans in Southeast Asia over the years. For example:

- * In Burma more than a decade ago, U.S. secret agents striving to influence Burmese political leanings were somehow sidetracked into the more rewarding pursuit of opium trading.
- * In Cambodia, U.S. secret agents were indirectly involved in an abortive coup d'etat contrived to overthrow Prince Sihanouk's government.
- * In Indonesia, U.S. secret agents backed a desultory rebellion aimed at undermining President Sukarno.
- * In Laos, U.S. secret agents' operations ranged from stuffing ballot-boxes to bolwarking a full-scale military offensive by insurgents against the country's capital.

None of the operations really succeeded in any significant, long-range sense. Some served to justify local leaders' doubts or hostility toward the U.S. And nearly everywhere in Southeast Asia, though supposedly clandestine, American covert activities were widely known.

The first of these earnest efforts, back in the 1950s, was focused on the tangled jungles of northwest Burma. Defeated by the Communists in China, bands of Chinese Nationalist troops had retreated into this area, where they became brisk

opium traders. It was considered, however, that they might perform a nobler purpose.

As it does now, Burma in those days adhered to a neutralist line. But neutralism, insisted the then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, was not only "immoral" but "short-sighted." Thus a scheme was devised to help the Burmese see the light.

The remnant Chinese Nationalists would be inspired to provoke Red China into attacking Burma, thereby forcing the Burmese to seek salvation in the Western camp. Ingenious as it was,

though, the plan worked poorly.

For one thing, the Americans assigned to supply the Nationalists with weapons and gold enlisted the aid of Gen. Phao Sriyanod, the police chief of neighboring Thailand. But Phao, a leading narcotics dealer, cared little about international politics. He simply wanted to latch on to the Nationalists' opium.

And under his aegis, an operation originally dedicated to saving Burmese souls soon degenerated into a lucrative narcotics trade.

See CIA, A10, Col. 5

1A

Washington Post
7 September 1965

CIA—From Page A1

U.S. Agents' Activities Stirred Asian Distrust

1B ← The aircraft mobilized to supply the Nationalists were mostly employed to transport opium, and several American agents, unable to resist temptation, eagerly joined in the smuggling.

Finally, in 1953, Gen. William (Wild Bill) Donovan went out to Bangkok, ostensibly as U. S. ambassador, effectively to clean up the mess.

The whole maneuver, dabbly conceived and artlessly executed, had inevitable repercussions. Blaming the U.S. for supporting the Chinese Nationalists on their territory, the Burmese renounced American aid and came close to quitting the United Nations. For other motives as well, Burma has since found an accommodation with Communist China more advantageous.

The abortive Burmese experience evidently did not deter further covert efforts, however. In 1953, a somewhat different sort of tactic was initiated against another "uncooperative" leader, Cambodia's Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

A ← Financed by U.S. funds and equipment, a team of South Vietnamese operatives joined Cambodian rebels

in attempting to overthrow Sihanouk and replace him with Dap Chuon, then the Cambodian Minister of Security. The plot fell apart when loyal Cambodian troops invaded the rebel

headquarters, killed Dap Chuon and discovered among the insurgents a United States Information Agency employee.

Only a month before, Sihanouk had publicly praised U.S. aid and denied any intention of flirting with communism. After the plot against him, he promptly recognized Red China and rejected a new offer of American assistance.

About the same time, U.S. operatives began to cast an eye toward Indonesia, where local army commanders scattered across the far-flung archipelago were rumbling against President Sukarno's government. Some objected to growing Communist strength; others had regional grievances.

As rebellions spread through Sumatra, east Java and other outlying areas, Secretary Dulles intruded with the opinion that the United States wished for Indonesia a regime that "reflects the real interests and desires of the people." Against the opposition of

2B American diplomats in Jakarta, covert U.S. support for the rebels started to flow south from bases in Formosa and the Philippines. One American pilot, Allan Lawrence Pope, was shot down while on a bombing mission over Indonesia.

Undesired U.S. help in the Indonesian rebels was never extensive, it seems. It was enough, however, to reinforce Sukarno's distrust of the U.S. Some specialists believe it was a turning point, after which Indonesia-American relations have steadily slid downhill.

By contrast, CIA operatives fanned out through primitive Laos with the authority of game wardens in a national park. They selected and subsidized local political leaders, and aided uprisings. They rigged the April 1950 elections that all the contested seats were won by right-wingers. In one constituency their chosen candidate received 13,000 votes while his pro-Communist opponent polled only four.

Later in 1950, while a State Department spokesman warned that civil war would only help the Communists, a team of covert American advisers engineered Gen. Phoumi Noravan's drive against Vientiane, the seat of the neutralist government headed by Prince Souvanna Phoum. One effect of the attack was to open the way for Soviet intervention into Laos.

3A After the Bay of Pigs disaster, President Kennedy founded a working committee to supervise CIA activities, and the day of romantic undercover operations wound. But there is still talk in Washington of putting the CIA under some kind of firm surveillance.

And as Lee Kuan Yew reflected in his Singapore charge, the notion still persists that U.S. policy in Southeast Asia is planned and activated by characters out of Ian Fleming novels—only not so good. In the popular image, these characters topple governments, subvert leaders, and seduce dragon ladies.

4A But whether the image is always true or sometimes exaggerated, U.S. policy is often a victim of its image.